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ABSTRACT

This Digest discusses issues related to full-time, nontenure track, contract college faculty, sometimes called contingent faculty. Recent data from several sources show that the opportunities for tenure are declining, while the numbers of nontenure positions are increasing. Part of the increase in full-time nontenure faculty is due to the decrease of federal and state aid to higher education institutions during the early 1990s. Other external factors include loss of public confidence in higher education, federal policies that influence faculty personnel policies, the cost of technology, the flexibility required for distance education, increased competition for students, downsizing trends, and criticisms of tenure. Many internal factors have been cited as contributing to this trend, including the dynamics of the academic labor market. Many concerns have been voiced about the increased reliance on contingent faculty, but some positive results have been noted, especially with regard to economic factors and flexibility. The continued rise in the employment of contract faculty is a significant trend that is likely to have a lasting impact. A positive outcome of these changes most likely depends on the ability of administrators and faculty to meet each other halfway to ensure the quality of student learning and some degree of job security in challenging financial times. (SLD)

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Contract Faculty in Higher Education
by Tamara Holub

Introduction
The hiring of full-time and part-time faculty in non-tenure track positions has been a growing and significant trend in higher education for more than a decade. During this period, opportunities for tenure-track positions have declined slightly (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Questions about how these trends will affect the time-honored system of tenure, the quality of instruction, and academic freedom are being debated by scholars, college and university administrators, state funding agencies, and a wide range of higher education advocacy groups. Since there has been considerable discussion elsewhere about the increase in and reliance on part-time faculty, this digest will primarily address issues surrounding full-time, non-tenure track, contract faculty.

Both full-time and part-time faculty in non-tenure track positions are often referred to as contract faculty or contingent faculty. Other terms that may apply to full-time non-tenure track faculty include term faculty, adjunct professors, visiting professors, and lecturers (Baldwin and Chronister, 2001). Tenured faculty enjoy long-term job security and significant benefits such as paid sabbaticals. In contrast, contingent faculty have limited contracts without the benefits of a long-term commitment from their hiring institution, and one-year appointments are common.

In a nationwide study, Baldwin and Chronister (2001) found that most colleges and universities hire full-time non-tenure track faculty to teach lower division undergraduate courses, though 4-year colleges will allow non-tenure track faculty to teach both upper and lower division courses. They also found that some institutions hire full-time non-tenure track faculty to fulfill teaching duties and clinical or field supervision or administrative work. Rarely do universities expect non-tenure track staff to do the same amount of research, teaching, and service as tenured faculty. According to Gappa (1996), colleges employ full-time non-tenure faculty as specialists in certain curricula or fields, especially professional schools; colleges also foster continuity in academic programs by relying more on full-time non-tenure faculty and less on part-time faculty.

Recent data
The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, conducted a national study of the tenure status of full-time instructional faculty and staff at 2-year and 4-year institutions. *The National Study of Postsecondary Faculty* (NSOPF) gathered information in three cycles: 1988, 1993, 1999. The latest NSOPF report, published in 2002, focuses on changes in the tenure status of full-time faculty between the fall of 1992 and the fall of 1998. Data from the first two cycles of NSOFP show that the proportion of tenured full-time faculty declined from 58% in the fall of 1987 to 54% in the fall of 1992 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. iii). Data from the most recent NSOPF cycle in 1999, indicated that the proportion of tenured full-time faculty slightly declined to 53 percent; another 19 percent of full-time faculty were on tenure track but not tenured; 18 percent were not on tenure track; and 10 percent worked at an institution with no tenure system (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 7).

Other significant data indicates that, between 1992 and 1998, the proportion of full-time faculty and staff diminished from 22% to 19%, and the percentage of faculty who were not on tenure track or who worked at institutions without tenure increased from 24% to 28% (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 7). The NSOPF report also surveyed the percentage of full-time faculty by tenure status in all program areas in the following categories: agriculture/home economics; business; education; engineering; fine arts; health sciences; humanities; natural sciences; social sciences; and all other fields. Data indicated that on average, between the fall of 1992 and the fall of 1998, the proportion of tenured full-time faculty and those on tenure track declined slightly while the percentage of full-time faculty not on tenure track and those not working at an institution with tenure increased slightly (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 13). The NSOFP data reveals that opportunities for tenure are declining while the numbers of non-tenure positions are increasing.

Why the growth of full-time faculty?
Part of the increase in full-time non-tenure faculty is due to the decrease of federal and state aid to higher education institutions during the early 1990s. Until the late 1980s, higher education enjoyed strong financial support from the federal government. However, as an economic recession hit the United States in the early 1990s, postsecondary institutions suffered from a decrease in aid and were forced to make up the difference by increasing tuition and fees and cutting costs. Part of the cost management efforts were directed at faculty and staff expenses at public and private institutions. Efficiency measures included reducing staff, halting faculty and staff hiring, and promoting early retirement (Baldwin and Chronister, 2001).
Baldwin and Chronister conducted a major study on full-time non-tenure faculty, which included an extensive literature review, campus surveys, reviews of institutional policy documents, and campus visits. They identified a host of external and internal factors which led to the increase in non-tenure positions on campuses. External factors include: higher education losing the public's trust and confidence; federal policies influencing faculty personnel policies; the high cost of implementing new technologies; flexibility required to implement distance education; increased competition for students from for-profit universities; downsizing trends; and criticisms of tenure (2001, pp. 13-24). They noted that internal factors include issues of rising costs, faculty workload and productivity, enrollment patterns and the changing characteristics of students; aging of the faculty; and the dynamics of the academic labor market which has a surplus of Ph.D.s in many fields (2001, pp. 24-30).

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What concerns haven arisen due to this trend?

Many concerns have been voiced in response to the increased reliance on contingent faculty coupled with the declining opportunities for tenured positions. The lack of job security posed by term contracts, obstacles to academic freedom, and diminished opportunities for student learning are cited as some of the main concerns. Academic freedom, the right of faculty to freely express and publish their ideas without fear of reprisal, is a core value in higher education. Without the security that tenure provides, many fear that contingent faculty will not express unpopular, challenging or even innovative ideas because they fear that their contracts will not be renewed if they do. (See American Association of University Professors, 2003; Gappa, 1996). Another concern is that contingent faculty, especially part-timers who are paid by each course and not by office hours, have neither the time nor the motivation to mentor students outside of class or to become involved in student activities (American Association of University Professors, 2003). Since contingent faculty are mainly employed to teach undergraduate lower division courses, Benjamin argues that "such over-reliance particularly disadvantages the less-well-prepared entering and lower-division students in the non-elite institutions who need more substantial faculty attention" (1997, p. 4). Some view the rise of non-tenured positions as an impediment to collegiality because of the inequities in status, pay, and security between tenured and contract faculty. Others fear the weakening of faculty governance since contract faculty are often barred from governance activities, and still others fear that morale will be diminished as faculty are pressed to be highly productive in an environment with shrinking opportunities (See Bess, 1998).

More positive aspects of this trend have been cited for both institutions and the faculty. Colleges and universities that hire contract faculty benefit economically and have more flexibility to make hiring decisions. Although many contingent faculty would prefer tenure, some faculty choose contract work for a variety of reasons: they have more flexibility in terms of location; they do not want the demands of tenure; or they have the freedom to choose a second career (Baldwin and Chronister, 2001). Another benefit is that institutions will often offer a contract position to the accompanying spouse or partner of a faculty member who been awarded tenure.

Conclusion

The continued rise in the employment of contract faculty is a significant trend that is likely to have a lasting impact on higher education. As states continue to experience tight budget constraints, it is not likely that the trend will end in the near future. A positive outcome of these changes in higher education most likely depends on the ability of administrators and faculty to meet each other halfway to ensure both the quality of student learning and some degree of job security in increasingly challenging financial times.

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